

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 19
Issue 2 *Spring-Summer*

Article 3

1989

First Day of Spring

Gerald Stern

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stern, Gerald. "First Day of Spring." *The Iowa Review* 19.2 (1989): 25-29. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3728>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Four Poems · *Gerald Stern*

FIRST DAY OF SPRING

I have been such a follower,
first Porphyry, then Alexander,
I have gone so long without shaving,
that now I have nothing
except this moustache and this forked stick.
Behold one T-shirt
I have travelled with from one wrinkled continent to the other;
behold one leg
that lifted me up over 40,000 thresholds.
My heart—such as it was—
always surprised me,
and my curved back,
it never gave out on the stairway,
it never paused once in spite of
the lifeless ankle
and the unlubricated lung.

There was a red carpet once
in the north of France
that wandered like a river
from the staircase to the first turn
and lapped against the plastered walls.
I stood outside a door
listening to two cries,
one guttural and despairing,
one frantic and birdlike.
I shifted my trunk to my left shoulder
and began another climb,
three steps to the landing,
sixteen or eighteen steps to the next river.
As far as I can remember,
even with the closing of the door

and the admiration of my own face
in the unsilvered mirror,
stuck as it was wrongly
between two loose pillars
on a mahogany wardrobe,
I listened to their cries
half with shame, half with desire,
and half with terror and half with unabashed regret.

That was the beginning of grief,
the start of a second life,
although it wasn't that
the love cries themselves did this,
it wasn't the moaning—
or the creaking floor
or the exploding pipes—
it was, for the first time in *my* life,
I was abandoned.
I had to grab some rail
or vestigial fixture
sticking out of the wall
and do a shaky dance
under the heavy trunk.
I was suspended.

I guess I lay on the bed
staring at the ceiling
and the painted wire going into the light bulb,
or I guess I lay there remembering—
although I know I cut short the first years
and I know I concentrated on the early tribes,
crying out with rage and disappointment
in their slide from shelf to shelf;
though what I should have done,
and what I was able to do later,
was smile at what they *did* do
in the 200,000 years,

the first half aeon.
It took me one decade
till I could lie peacefully,
and two or more—
I think it was three or more—
to forgive myself,
or just to ignore myself,
for singing at the wrong time,
for interrupting the way I do,
for moaning, for talking out loud,
for being a dwarf.

In the great and lasting argument
that overwhelmed the Mediterranean
for more than a thousand years
I took the losing side.
I would do that in Spain
in the time of the two Solomons
and I would do that in America
in the time of the two Stevensons.
I wanted to mourn for kings,
I wanted a bonnie prince,
and I wanted to feel the stinging
salt on my face too—
the silent ship, the sym-
pathetic sailors, the letters
wrapped in leather, a bottle
waiting to be opened,
a ribbon around the neck.
I solved problem after problem
in 1985
in the *campo dei fiore*
not only at the fish stand
but in the freezing movie house
where we sat in leather coats
and rocked in our chairs
watching the Blues Brothers

in English and Italian.
This is where Bruno died,
this is where my foot dragged
on the way to the river,
this is where Brutus—may
the Lord keep him insane—
swam before eating.
My favorite church
both then and now
was Il Gesu
where the Jews were herded together on Holy Thursday
to listen to a sermon
on the joys of conversion,
only a few blocks away
from the Vesuvio Palace, my
own crowded bakery.

It was astounding
to walk up that red carpet
in the fifth decade,
and it was astounding
to rock by the river
in the middle of the eighth.
Something was in my mind
both then and then
and something later brought it back again.
Sometimes you wait for forty years, it was
a little less for me
when I first thought of Alexander and Porphyry.
I have forgotten now, but I remember
it was a sweet elation, I was happy
and I was half-suspended.

I am sitting
in Arizona, the moon is full, so check
the twenty-first of March, 1989.
I am reading Horace tonight, who never
wrote by porchlight, maybe a dish of oil

outside Brindisi. Ah, the stricken soul,
he sat till midnight waiting for a girl
who never came. I love his *sense*, he knew
where the ludicrous lay, he hated
quackery. I wonder
if maybe in the palace he had seen
a bromeliad once and touched the drooping flower—
the rubbery claws; I wonder if he talked
to a passing fox about the frogs that lived
in those leaves, if he had exchanged some wisdom, how
it only eats air, how it clings to palm trees; I wonder
if March twenty-first was when the plum tree bloomed
in Tivoli, if he had also seen
hundreds of butterflies in those branches, if he
lay down and wept—in spite of his careful mind—
if that is the third suspension, the third abandonment.

THREE HEARTS

A chicken with three hearts, that is a vanished
breed, a day of glory in the corn,
romance against a fence. It was the sunset
just above New Egypt that made me wince,
it was the hay blown up from Lakewood. God
of chance, how much I loved you in those days,
how free I felt and what a joy it was
sitting there with my book, my two knees braced
against the dashboard. How empty it was then,
and how my mind went back. How many hearts
did the chickadee have? How much whistling and singing
was in those fields? How far did I have to go
to disappear in those grasses, to pick those trillium?